
Chapter One

Introduction

Washington State is incrementally upgrading its Amtrak *Cascades* intercity passenger rail service along the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor (PNWRC) in western Washington.

The State's goal is to provide faster, safer, more frequent, and more reliable passenger rail service. The State's vision for passenger rail in the Pacific Northwest extends over a twenty-year horizon. Service is being increased over time based on market demand, available partners, and legislative funding. More information regarding the PNWRC Program can be found in the Amtrak *Cascades* Plan for Washington State 1998 – 2018 Update, April 2000.

Exhibit 1-1 presents the rail corridor and station locations for Amtrak *Cascades* intercity passenger rail.

What is intercity passenger rail?

Intercity passenger rail connects a central city to a central city on a railroad right-of-way in densely traveled corridors. Intercity passenger rail service is typically designed to serve passengers traveling 75 miles or more. Passengers aboard the Amtrak *Cascades*, the PNWRC intercity passenger rail service, travel an average of 150 miles and typically travel to business meetings, to visit family and friends, to shop and to attend special events. Longer distance intercity passenger rail trains in the Pacific Northwest include the *Coast Starlight*, Amtrak's Seattle – Los Angeles train, and Amtrak's Seattle/Portland-Chicago *Empire Builder*. Intercity passenger rail usually shares its right-of-way with existing freight rail service. All Amtrak trains in Washington State operate over The Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company's (BNSF) main line.



**Amtrak *Cascades*'
Service Corridor and
Station Locations**
Exhibit 1-1

Intercity passenger rail differs from other types of passenger rail in a number of ways. Commuter rail, for example, also travels along existing railroad rights-of-way. However, commuter rail connects a central



Amtrak Cascades Talgo trainset

city with its suburbs and primarily provides service only during morning and evening commute hours. Sound Transit's *Sounder* commuter rail service shares The Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company's right-of-way with Amtrak *Cascades* service in the area between Seattle and Tacoma. Eventually, commuter rail service will extend south to Lakewood and north to Everett, along the same rail right-of-way.

Other modes of passenger rail travel include heavy rail, light rail and high-speed rail. Heavy and light rail are found in dense urban areas. Both modes serve urban residents for commuting as well as leisure travel. Heavy rail lines travel on their own dedicated rights-of-way and are grade-separated (either above- or below-ground) from other modes of traffic. New York City's subway and elevated system is an example of heavy rail. Light rail, on the other hand, typically shares its right-of-way with automobiles. Light rail service is often referred to as trolley service. An example of light rail is Portland's MAX system and Sound Transit's future Link system.

High-speed rail, like Japan's bullet train, is a faster version of the Amtrak *Cascades* intercity passenger rail service. High-speed rail travels at speeds greater than 110 mph and typically travels on its own dedicated right-of-way. Speeds greater than 110 mph are currently not anticipated for the Amtrak *Cascades* program.

How did the Amtrak *Cascades* program begin?

The vision of reduced travel times and better intercity passenger rail service in the Pacific Northwest began in the late 1980s when the Washington State legislature funded a program to improve rail depots across the state. In 1991, the legislature directed¹ the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) to develop a comprehensive assessment of the feasibility of developing a high-speed ground transportation system in the state of Washington.

Also in the early 1990s, the Federal Railroad Administration designated the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor one of five high-speed rail corridors in the United States. In April 1993, the state legislature directed² WSDOT to develop "high-quality

¹Substitute House Bill 1452

²Revised Code of Washington 47.79

General Vicinity Map and Project Area Exhibit 1-2



intercity passenger rail service ... through incremental upgrading of the existing [Amtrak] service.”

The legislature recognized the need to provide the traveling public with an alternate means of transportation. By providing this alternative means, growing physical pressure on our existing highway infrastructure could potentially be decreased. In addition, a decrease in environmental impacts resulting from increased motor vehicle travel could also be achieved.³

How has WSDOT responded to its legislative directive?

Over the past seven years, the states of Washington and Oregon and the province of British Columbia have commissioned a series of feasibility studies to assess the practical problems, costs, and benefits of investing public funds to incrementally upgrade the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor for fast, frequent, safe and reliable passenger rail service. The Amtrak Cascades Plan for Washington State 1998 - 2018 was the outcome of these studies.⁴

Resulting from the twenty-year plan (and investment by the states), a number of projects along the corridor have already been implemented. Completed projects include track improvements between Portland and Vancouver, British Columbia (BC), and

³For example, Amtrak Cascades service, which operates between Eugene, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia, diverted more than 33 million vehicle miles of traffic from regional highways and prevented more than 763 tons of air pollution in 2001 (Source: WSDOT Rail Office).

⁴The Environmental Overview for the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor, Volumes 1 and 2 (December 1998) was also completed as part of this planning process. The environmental overview provided a corridor-level review and mapping of environmental and community conditions between Vancouver, British Columbia and Portland, Oregon. The purpose of this overview was to consider the environment at the planning stage – while giving the state flexibility to design an incremental service program. The overview approach ensured early and meaningful evaluation of alternatives.

station improvements and renovations⁵ throughout the corridor.

These physical investments in the corridor have resulted in:

- Expanded service between Portland and Seattle (1994 and 1998);
- Expanded service between Portland and Eugene (1994);
- Reinstated service between Seattle and Vancouver, BC (1995);
- Reduced travel time between Seattle and Portland (1998); and
- Expanded service between Bellingham and Seattle (1999).

In addition, the Amtrak *Cascades* service was introduced in 1999. This new service features new trains built by Talgo, Inc. and upgraded customer amenities.

WSDOT, working in cooperation with the state of Oregon, Amtrak, and The Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company, has committed more than \$350 million towards implementation of near-term (within the next five years) improvements to the overall rail system. To date, more than \$125 million has been committed by the state of Washington. Through cooperation with Amtrak, railroads and others, another \$325 million has also been invested.

WSDOT works with these agencies and organizations to identify physical improvements that are necessary, not only to increase intercity passenger rail service, but also to ensure that the existing passenger service remains reliable and safe. The **Vancouver Rail Project** has been identified as one of these improvements.

Where is the Vancouver Rail Project located?

The project is located in southwestern Clark County within the City of Vancouver (see **Exhibit 1-2**). It extends from approximately rail mileposts 132.5 to 136.5 on The Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company's (BNSF) Seattle to Portland main line and in the vicinity of rail milepost 10.02 on the BNSF Vancouver, WA to Spokane main line. The surrounding study area is comprised of various residential neighborhoods, agricultural lands, and industrial facilities. **Exhibit 1-3** presents the general study area for the **Vancouver Rail Project**.

⁵Station improvements and renovations have been completed in: Bellingham; Tukwila; Olympia/Lacey; Everett, Centralia; Kelso/Longview; and Vancouver, WA. Improvements and renovations have been initiated in Mount Vernon/Burlington and Seattle.

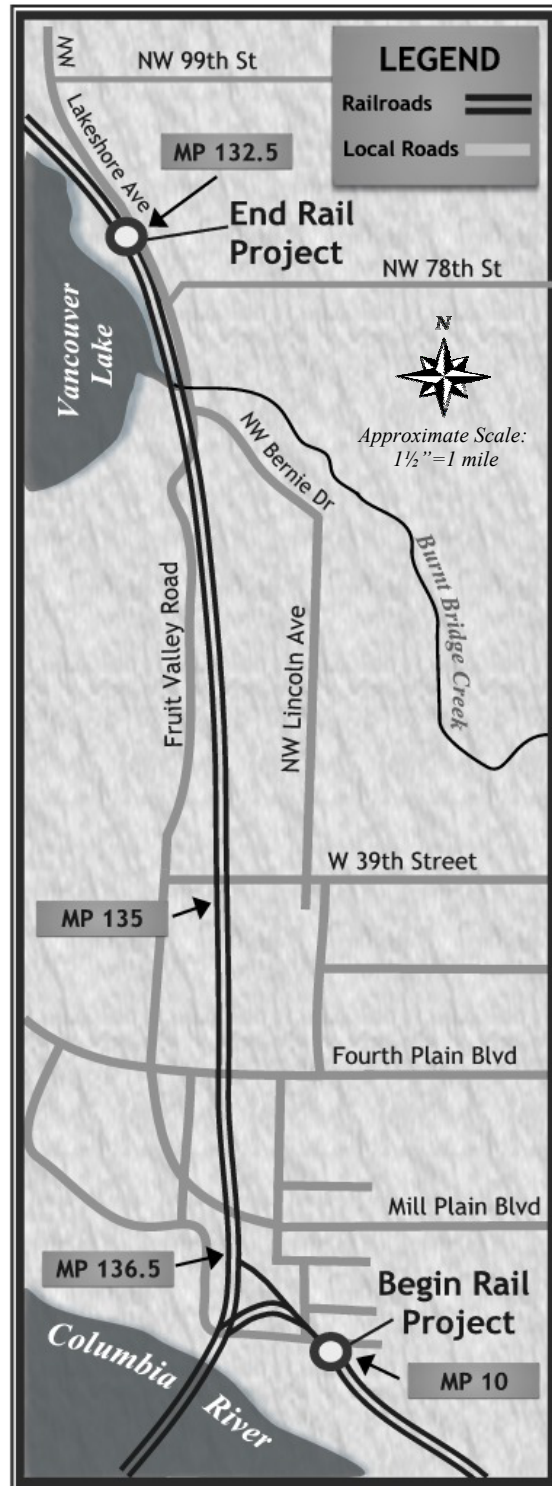
How does the Vancouver Rail Project fit within the State's incremental approach?

WSDOT has identified the **Vancouver Rail Project** as the first major improvement in a planned series of projects needed to incrementally improve Amtrak *Cascades* service along the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor (PNWRC). This project will allow for more efficient movement of existing passenger trains through the congested Vancouver rail yard area, thus improving schedule reliability. In addition, safety in and around the Vancouver rail yard will be enhanced.

Why is WSDOT preparing this Environmental Impact Statement?

Under Washington's State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), any agency that proposes to take an official action is required to perform a series of environmental analyses⁶ to ensure minimal impacts will result from that action. At the federal level,

Project Area and Termini
Exhibit 1-3



⁶Unless the action is exempt under SEPA.

pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), a similar environmental analysis must be performed if the proposed action is being implemented by a federal agency, requires a federal permit, or has federal funding.

As a result, the **Vancouver Rail Project** – which is being initiated by a state agency and potentially may have federal funding – must follow federal and state environmental regulations as dictated by SEPA and NEPA.

Why is the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) involved in this project?

Under NEPA, a federal agency is required to be the lead agency.⁷ For the **Vancouver Rail Project**, that federal lead agency is the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).⁸ SEPA, similar to NEPA, also requires a lead agency. As the state agency proposing the project, WSDOT is the lead agency under SEPA.

To satisfy both NEPA and SEPA requirements, the two agencies have developed this combined NEPA/SEPA document for the **Vancouver Rail Project**. This Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) evaluates the environmental impacts of this project. It addresses direct (including construction-related) impacts, as well as indirect and cumulative impacts.

Based on this environmental analysis, as well as resource agency and public input into this document, a preferred alternative (action) was selected and is presented in this Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

How was the preferred alternative selected?

The FHWA and WSDOT selected the preferred alternative, based on findings from the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), as well as state and federal agency, local government, tribal, and public comments. Following circulation of this FEIS, FHWA will identify a “selected alternative”. If the selected alternative is a build alternative,⁹ the selected alternative will advance to design and permitting

⁷A lead agency is the agency with the main responsibility for complying with either state or federal environmental regulations.

⁸In 1993, under the five-year high-speed rail initiative, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) was charged with the responsibility of overseeing the high-speed rail program. Since the agency had not funded many large capital projects, the FRA did not have appropriate environmental procedures in place. As such, the FRA partnered with FHWA – giving FHWA the designation as federal lead agency. In addition, it was agreed that states would follow FHWA environmental procedures (for high-speed rail projects). In many states, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was developed between FHWA, FRA and the state to address the roles and responsibilities for NEPA actions. WSDOT, FRA and FHWA signed an MOU in October 1995.

⁹For an environmental analysis, the term “build alternative” refers to any alternative under consideration other than a no action or no build alternative. A no action or no build alternative usually refers to a situation where the transportation infrastructure remains as is.

following circulation of a Record of Decision (ROD).¹⁰ Mitigation measures identified in this Environmental Impact Statement and in permit conditions will be incorporated into the design of the selected alternative. It should be noted, because the City of Vancouver is a first class city,¹¹ permission from the Vancouver City Council will be necessary for any proposed street closings within city limits.

What are the next steps in this environmental process?

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was released for public review in February 2002. Following the 45-day comment period (and public hearing), the project team incorporated and responded to the public and agency comments. Based on these comments, additional technical analysis was also performed in the areas of noise and vibration, air quality, relocation and disruption, cultural resources, and wetlands. Following release of this Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), the following actions will occur:



The Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company's Vancouver Rail Yard

1. A Record of Decision (ROD) by FHWA will be issued (Summer 2003); and
2. If project funding is available, project permitting (including public review periods) and construction will begin (2004).

What information is contained in this environmental document?

This Final Environmental Impact Statement follows standard NEPA and SEPA guidelines. The purpose of and need for the **Vancouver Rail Project** is presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Three discusses potential solutions and alternatives to address any problems identified in the Purpose and Need. It also included a discussion of the preferred alternative. Chapter Four summarizes the environmental and community context of this project, and Chapter Five presents potential benefits, impacts and mitigation for the proposed **Vancouver Rail Project** alternatives.

¹⁰A Record of Decision (ROD) is the final public document released by FHWA stating their decision of a selected alternative, and constitutes location approval.

¹¹A first class city is a city with a population of ten thousand or more at the time of its organization or reorganization that has a charter adopted under Article XI, section 10, of the state Constitution. Per RCW 35.22.280, first class cities are granted the power to regulate and control the use (and vacation) of streets.

Revised technical analyses for some environmental resource areas are also presented in this chapter. Chapter Six discusses potential cumulative effects that may result from implementation of this and other projects in the Vancouver area, and Chapter Seven provides a summary of findings from this environmental process. Supplemental technical information is provided at the back of this document and in a separate volume of appendices. It should be noted that **Appendix G** in this document includes public and agency comments that were received by the project team during the 45-day public comment period (February – March 2002). **Appendix H** includes testimony from the public hearing which was held on March 6, 2002.